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## Texas Policy Priorities

As Texas Legislature prepares to convene this month, IDRA is releasing a series of stories on our policy priorities. The first editions focused on [Effective School Assessments and Accountability that Does Not Hurt Students](#), [Texas Must Fulfill its Funding Promises to Public Schools](#), and [Plan Needed for Educating English Learners; Reimagining School Discipline](#). Stay tuned for future updates and see additional recommendations, research and resources at [IDRA's Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement website](#).

See [Spanish-language version](#) of this edition.

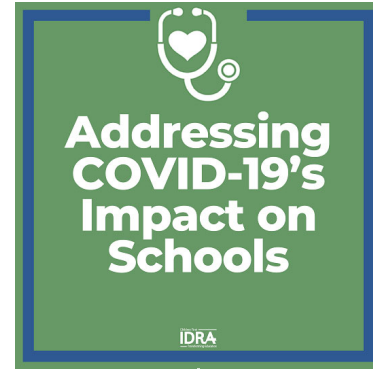
January 14, 2021

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# Texas Needs an Equitable Response to COVID-19 that Includes a Statewide Broadband and Student-Family Engagement Plans

Schools had to make significant adjustments to the ways they teach and support students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While virtual instruction is not new, the massive shift to remote education options revealed stark educational inequities in funding, technological resources, and how schools engage families, many of whom became at-home instructors and tutors.



[Texas is one of just six states with no state broadband plan](#) (De Wit, et al., 2020).

## Where We Stand for the Upcoming Texas Legislative Session

While students are attempting to plug into their own virtual education, parents and families work to overcome the state's lack of plans for broadband or for family engagement. Texas policymakers must invest in long-term family and student engagement programs that foster authentic communication between schools and families, rebuild positive relationships among students and families with their schools, and overcome the digital divide.

## Why We Need Plans for Statewide Broadband and Student-Family Engagement

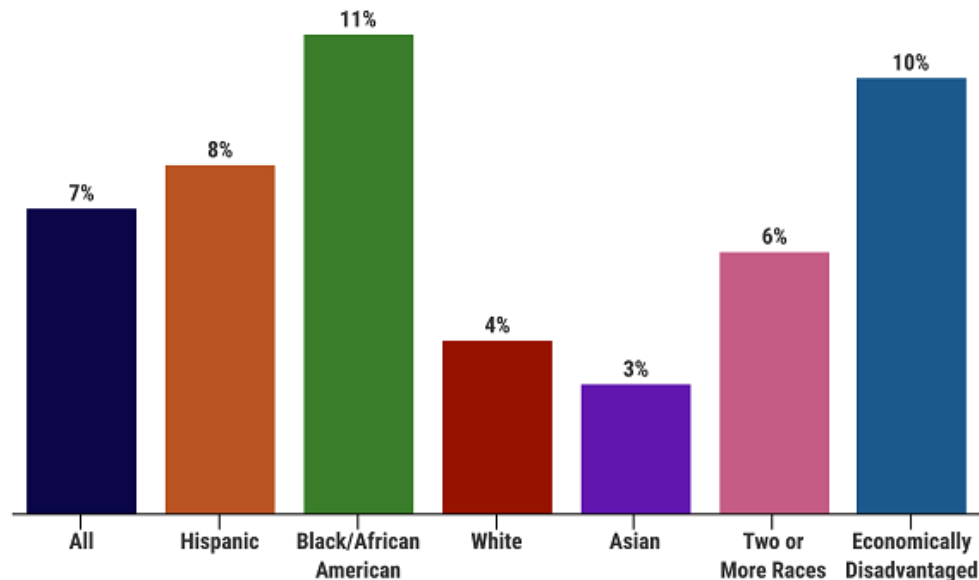
An equitable response to the COVID-19 pandemic must include a state broadband plan and clear steps to engage students and families. Over 1.7 million Texas households, about 18%, [do not have broadband internet access](#) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Communities without reliable internet service [face significant disparities](#) in access to employment opportunities, healthcare and social support in addition to education opportunities (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2020).

The digital divide disproportionately affects students of color and those from households with low incomes, making it harder for them to complete coursework and feel connected to their teachers and peers.

The Texas Education Agency reported that [more than 600,000 Texas public school students](#) – over one in 10 students – did not complete assignments or respond to teacher outreach in spring 2020 during the pandemic (TEA, 2020). And schools lost touch with Black students and Latino students at over twice the rate of white students (TEA, 2020).

State leaders need to consider how schools can best engage with students and families both virtually and in school during the pandemic and beyond when students can safely return to in-person schooling.

### Texas Students Not Engaged in Virtual Learning, 2019-20



Data Source: Summary of Student Engagement in Virtual Learning in School Year 2019-2020, Texas Education Agency, June 30, 2020

### Policy Recommendations

IDRA recommends that state lawmakers do the following.

- **Create a statewide broadband plan for rural and urban communities.** The plan should address education needs to close the digital divide for students of our most vulnerable populations – students with disabilities, English learner (emergent bilingual) students, students from low-income families, and students of color – across K-12 schools and higher education.
- **Increase financial support and training resources for digital literacy programs** to support access, connectivity, and academic and social engagement of students in either virtual or in-person learning environments.
- **Promote policies that protect student and educator physical and emotional health, safety and well-being.**
- **Support continued distance-learning activities,** ensuring all students and their families are connected to their school and have access to education, resources and a robust two-way communication system.
- **Avoid across-the-board cuts to education and health services.** Use the state Economic Stabilization Funds (or “Rainy Day Funds”) to stabilize the state budget and school district funding for COVID-19-related expenditures.
- **Identify and develop new revenue-generating mechanisms for state budgets,** such as restoring the franchise tax previous levels and implementing

taxes on more services.

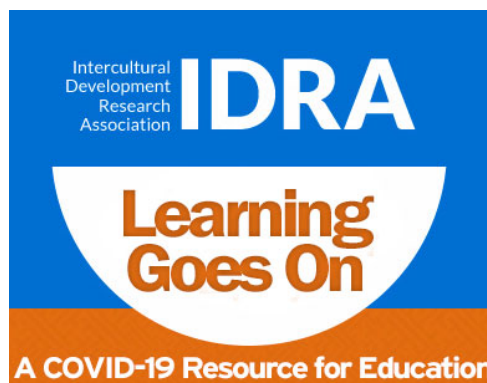
- **Increase resources for family support personnel and programs**, including parent support specialists and family liaisons.
- **Allocate funds to train, attract and retain teachers to fill teacher shortages**, which are likely to increase.

The move to virtual instruction since the start of the pandemic has shown the need for robust student and family engagement programming while addressing the digital divide. State policymakers must address these dire concerns to create an equitable response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

By taking steps now to develop and implement a comprehensive state plan for equitable education for emergent bilinguals, Texas lawmakers will be investing in the future of all students.



[Learn more at IDRA's Education Policy website on A Comprehensive Equity Approach to Addressing COVID-19's Impact on Schools](#)



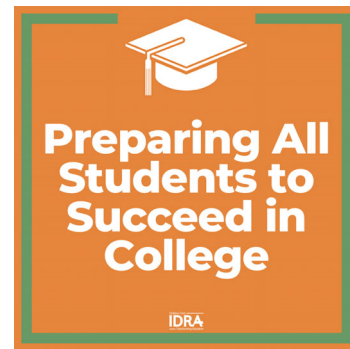
[See Learning Goes On – IDRA's COVID-19 Resource for Education website](#)

## **Remove Barriers to College for All Texas Students and Beyond**

### **Where We Stand for the Upcoming Texas Legislative Session**

Quality education is a civil right denied to many Texans. IDRA works to expand opportunities for marginalized students across the PK-16 continuum by eliminating barriers to college access and graduation. School policies and practices must

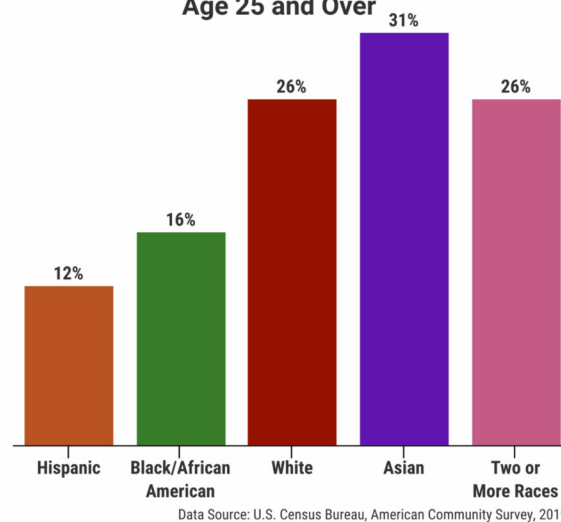
create equitable opportunities that enable all students to transition smoothly between high school and college.



To increase the number of historically underserved students who graduate from college, we work for equity in college preparation, access and success.

Many students of color, immigrant students, and students from families with limited incomes attend elementary and secondary schools that fail to properly prepare them for post-secondary study. In addition, while college should be an option for all Texans, it remains out of reach for many due to cost and biased admission criteria. Even once in college, students face barriers that inhibit college success.

**Texas Educational Attainment:  
Bachelor's Degree by Race-Ethnicity  
Age 25 and Over**



## Policy Recommendations

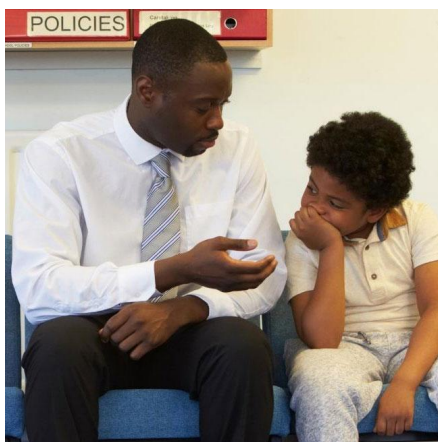
All Texas students who pursue higher education deserve to study at institutions that are free from all forms of discrimination and that are equitably resourced. We urge the Texas Legislature to:

- **Revise high school graduation pathways and requirements to ensure all students receive rigorous curriculum**, including Algebra II, for college readiness.
- **Develop data monitoring systems for TEA to collect and report high school endorsement data.**
- **Provide additional supports for counselor-student ratios, counselor compensation and required training.**
- **Continue to graduate students who prove their well-rounded academic qualifications to independent graduation committees (IGCs).**
- **Re-regulate public university tuition rates and increase state funding for public colleges and universities.**

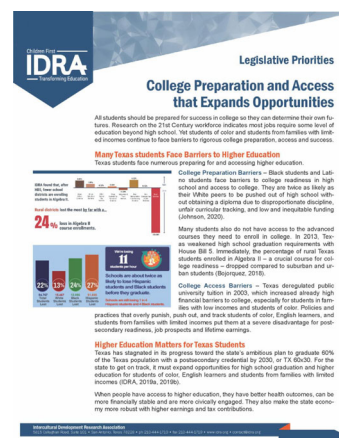
- **Increase funding for state-funded college grant programs**, including the TEXAS Grant and Texas Equal Educational Opportunity Grant programs.
- **Maintain the Top Ten Percent Plan without changes.** The Top Ten Percent Plan enables Texas students graduating in the top 10% of their class to gain automatic admission to public colleges. The plan has increased postsecondary access significantly to Black and Latino students across Texas.
- **Protect and expand access to college for undocumented and DACA-recipient students** by keeping in-state tuition eligibility and increasing their access to state and institutional financial aid.
- **Require institutional faculty diversity plans that are connected to funding.**
- **Allocate federal and state funding for college student emergencies and crises.**
- **Provide accelerated learning opportunities and other support to ensure that all COVID-19-era students are college-ready.**

When Texas is intentional about guaranteeing college preparation, access and success by appropriately serving marginalized student populations, we can realize the [Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's vision](#) “to be among the highest achieving states in the country” (THECB, 2020). Outlined in the 60x30 higher education strategic plan, this vision has four goals, one of which is for 60% of the Texas population between ages 25 and 34 to hold a certificate or college degree.

We have an obligation to put policies in place to ensure that all students, especially those in historically underserved populations, are equipped to succeed in college.



[Learn more at IDRA's Education Policy website on Preparing All Students to Succeed in College](#)



[See IDRA's Legislative Priorities Factsheet: College Preparation and Access that Expands](#)

## Texas Must Prioritize Public Schools

### Where We Stand for the Upcoming Texas Legislative Session

Public schools act as hubs for our communities. Texas public schools receive funds from taxpayers, who decide on its distribution by publicly-elected school board members. This keeps public school funding accountable to the public.



However, efforts to move public funds to privately-operated education hurt public schools that serve most students. Policies that redirect public funds to privately-owned and operated charter schools and to voucher and voucher-like programs divert public education dollars for individual private use, including virtual charter and voucher school networks.

Charter schools account for 14% of state funding, or over \$3.5 billion just this year, but enroll just over 6% of Texas students. Since 2010, state funding for charter schools has increased by over 200% but just 6% for traditional school districts.

Due to strong opposition among Texans, voucher programs have not taken root in this state, despite repeated attempts to pass voucher legislation. Vouchers often target students receiving special education services but do not cover the actual costs of private special education accommodations (and private schools do not have to adhere to federal requirements for providing special education services). To make up for insufficient state funds, public schools must provide the additional funds needed to serve students with specific special education needs.

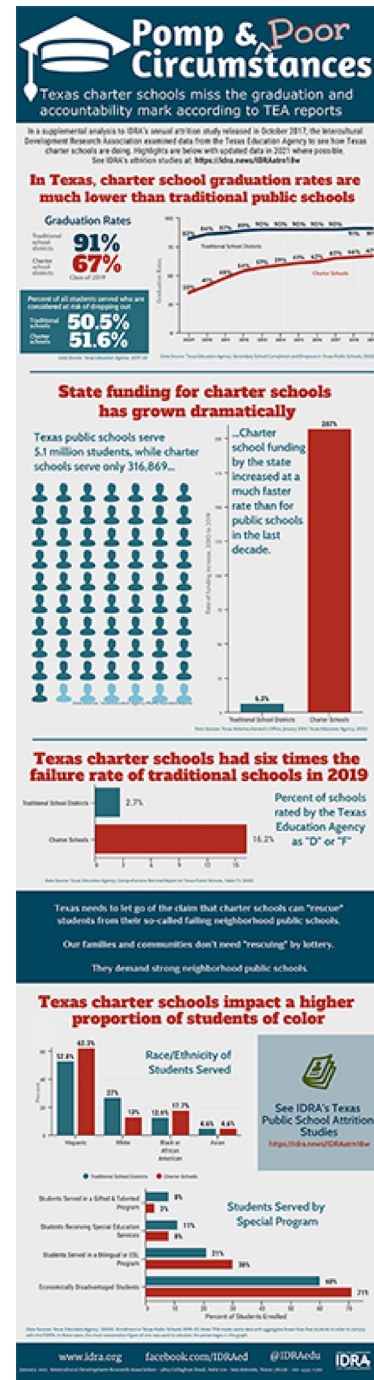
Now, more than ever, Texas must provide the funds needed for public schools to provide all students an excellent, college-ready education. Decades of underfunding disproportionately affects students from marginalized communities that include Black students, Latino students, students with disabilities, and English learners (emergent bilinguals).

## Policy Recommendations

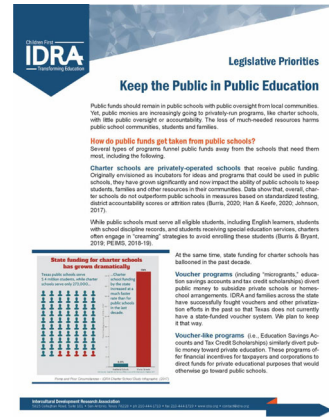
Texas lawmakers must ensure that public dollars go to public schools during the upcoming legislative session. This means the following:

- **Ensure public funds have public oversight and are not used to support private interests**, like privately-owned and operated charter schools, private schools, and voucher and voucher-like programs that do not serve the vast majority of students.
- **End expansion of charter schools and hold charter schools to the same accountability standards as public schools** in achievement, expenditures, student progress and enrollment.
- **Ensure communities are involved in decision-making processes** that impact their local public schools, including local and state-level processes about charter applications and amendments.
- **Ensure that charters cannot “cream” students** (selecting their preferred students based on academic achievement, English learner or special education designation or discipline history).
- **Reject proposals for virtual voucher programs that operate a private vendor-run education.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on schools and communities across the state, with disproportionate impacts for students from households with low incomes, students of color, emergent bilingual students, and students receiving special education services. The state needs to retain public funds in public schools and consider additional funding for public schools to reopen for students, families and community members safely.







[Learn more at IDRA's Education Policy website on Keeping the Public in Public Education](#)

[See IDRA's Legislative Priorities Brief: Keep the Public in Public Education \(in English & Spanish\)](#)

## Join Our Texas Education CAFE Advocacy Network

IDRA's family leadership in education process, [Education CAFE™](#), supports parents and caregivers to understand and influence public school policy and practice. This January, families in Texas will have various opportunities to inform legislators and staff about their priorities, needs and hopes for the education of their children, from birth through college graduation.

Due to COVID-19, there likely will be a drastic change in how the general public will be able to interact with policymakers during the Texas legislative session. Now more than ever, policymakers need to hear from the very people their decisions will impact. IDRA is launching a family and community advocacy network focusing on education issues in the Texas legislative session. We invite families and community advocates to join in.

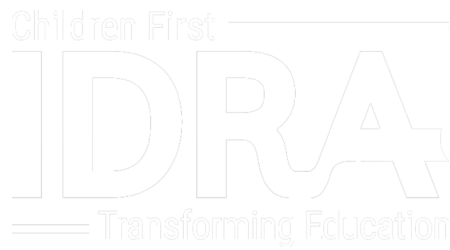
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Reach Out To Us



The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.

IDRA works hand-in-hand with hundreds of thousands of educators and families each year in communities and classrooms around the country. All our work rests on an unwavering commitment to creating self-renewing schools that value and promote the success of students of all backgrounds.